

The Confusion of Predictability

A Reader-Response Approach of “A Respectable Woman”

In Chopin’s story, “A Respectable Woman,” the readers are taken on a journey where they have to discern Mrs. Baroda’s intentions and feelings for Mr. Gouvernail, a man who is not her husband. Mrs. Baroda appears to go back and forth throughout the text, which makes it very difficult for any reader of the story to find meaning. The only meaning that can be found in the story is the meaning that is created in the reader; Stanley Fish, a famous literary theorist, argues that the reader creates meaning as he or she reads. In this story, the various readers would find themselves trying to create meaning from the text and would only succeed to do so at the end of the story. The meaning that readers may find in the text can vary, depending on cultural norms, the people they associate with, and what they were taught to value when they were raised. With its uncertainty, the story “A Respectable Woman,” allows the readers to find and create their own meaning from the text.

Throughout this paper, the term “the reader” will be used operating on Stanley Fish’s assumption that literary critics can predict how anyone (with a good understanding of the language) would react to the text. Fish argues that a reader’s response is predictable because of the rules of the language:

If the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform; that is, it will proceed in terms of the system of rules all speakers share. . . . They will make response, to some extent, predictable and normative. (Fish 84)

The reader thereby responds to words on a page just as anyone else with a grasp of the language would. Indeed, the semantics in “A Respectable Woman” create confusion for the

reader for the first two pages; however, the ending of the story (which will be discussed later), complicates the term “the reader” and it will have to be redefined towards the end of the analysis.

The audience that Kate Chopin wrote for were “seasoned souls,” as Pamela Knights described in her introduction to *The Awakening and Other Stories*: “Many were struck by the force of her subject matter. . . . Others, conceded that *The Awakening* was indeed ‘not for the young person. . . .’” (Knights ix), which significantly narrows Chopin’s readership to an older demographic. With that in mind, the “ideal reader” of “A Respectable Woman” would likely be an adult that lived in the 19th century, who frequently read *Vogue*, the magazine that “A Respectable Woman” was first published in. The ideal reader would read the title of this story and immediately assume that the story will be about “A Respectable Woman.” Most likely, the reader would assume that the title should be taken literally rather than ironically at this point and that “Respectable” implies morality and class. With that in mind, the reader already has an expectation going into the story—that the fiction will destroy as the story progresses.

The opening line incites several questions to the reader: “Mrs. Baroda was a little provoked to learn that her husband expected his friend, Gouvernail, up to spend a week or two on the plantation” (255). Here immediately the reader is introduced to and assumes that Mrs. Baroda is the respectable woman referenced in the title. The expectation of her being respectable is also challenged in this opening line because she is “provoked” by the fact that she will have to entertain her husband’s friend. Normally, we would expect a woman of class to enjoy entertaining rather than being bothered by company. It is also important to note that the opening line also tells the reader that Mr. Gouvernail is her husband’s friend and not her own.

In the second paragraph, the reader’s initial assumptions that stem from the opening sentence are challenged. At first, the reader may be confused as to why a respectable woman would be provoked at the notion of having company; however, the second paragraph answers that initial question that the reader may be thinking by stating that Mrs. Baroda planned to spend time with her husband in peace when Mr. Gouvernail disrupted those

plans. The text merely says that they entertained “a good deal during the winter” and that Mrs. Baroda had been looking forward to resting and spending “undisturbed” time with her husband (255). The second paragraph paints a picture of a loving wife who longs for time with her husband, which then explains why she was annoyed at having to entertain company instead. However, this picture that is painted is something that the reader fills in. The text itself does not say that the Barodas spent time apart or were not intimate when they had to entertain guests. The transactional experience between the reader and the text is what allows the reader to interpret that Mrs. Baroda is a loving and respectable wife who only wants to spend time with her husband in peace.

As the story progresses, however, the reader has to go back and re-read the text to ensure that it has been interpreted correctly. Stanley Fish would say that this exemplifies the “activity” of reading (Fish 83). The reader is not merely consuming facts on a page, but is actively involved in creating meaning which changes as the text is read. In the first two paragraphs, the reader might assume that the story is about Mr. and Mrs. Baroda and the interrupting friend, Mr. Gouvernail. The reader quickly has to revise this assumption because the story then digresses and does not discuss Mr. Baroda much at all because he is a secondary character. Mr. Baroda only serves to act as a foil in the story which brings out Mrs. Baroda’s characteristics. Mr. Baroda is mainly used to show Mrs. Baroda’s undecidedness towards Mr. Gouvernail.

An interesting point is that in the third paragraph of the story, there is a character gap that the reader easily fills in. The text does not specifically say that Mrs. Baroda is a “Society” woman, but there is an implication that the reader takes to mean that she is not only respectable but she is also a woman of Society. That gap lies within the line: “[Mr. Gouvernail was] in no sense a Society man or a ‘man about town,’ which were, perhaps, some of the reasons she had never met him” (255). The negation of the phrase “a man about town” might make the reader sense that Mr. Gouvernail was not a ladies man. Simultaneously, that same line may make the reader make the leap that Mrs. Baroda is a woman of Society and that she really only socializes with other high-class Society folk. This is important because the reader is then given a shallow image of Mrs. Baroda and is given an

image of what Mr. Gouvernail is *not*.

The main task for the reader in “A Respectable Woman” is to interpret exactly what Mrs. Baroda’s feelings and intentions are for Mr. Gouvernail. Indeed, this is a difficult task because Mrs. Baroda appears to say, think, and act differently than the reader would expect. This is part of the reason that there are competing interpretations for the story because the story itself does not offer a tidy resolution. In fact, the moment that Mrs. Baroda meets Mr. Gouvernail the reader may easily take her literally when she thinks to herself: “She rather liked him when he first presented himself” (255), to actually mean that she liked him. However, there is some doubt that could creep into the reader’s mind as to how long she liked him because she said she liked him *when* she first met him, implying that she only liked him when she first met him. Indeed, the reader’s assumptions are true, because Mrs. Baroda immediately begins to question why she liked Mr. Gouvernail, a question that she cannot answer herself. The reader then questions Mrs. Baroda’s feelings for Mr. Gouvernail because “She could discover in him none of those brilliant traits which Gaston, her husband, had often assured her that he possessed” (255), which then confirms for the reader that Mrs. Baroda does not find Mr. Gouvernail very appealing.

As the story progresses, the reader begins to realize that Mrs. Baroda’s words and actions cannot be trusted. The meaning that the reader is attempting to create becomes muddled by confusion because at one point Mrs. Baroda states that she desires to “penetrate” Mr. Gouvernail’s personal space, but then on the same page she tells her husband that “he tires me frightfully” (256). The reader is attempting to create a tidy story, where the character’s intentions are clear but the reader cannot create these tidy resolutions when Mrs. Baroda seems to be infatuated with Mr. Gouvernail and also appears to be annoyed by him. The knowledgeable reader would be aware that Chopin writes many of her characters with unclear motives and would thereby reserve his or her interpretation for the end. The knowledgeable reader would recall that Calixta in Chopin’s story *The Storm*, was very ambiguous when it came to the separation of lust and marriage. Calixta had an affair but stayed married and “devoted” to her husband in the end (347). Consequently, if the reader is familiar with Chopin’s fiction, the confusion elicited by the text would likely be familiar as

well. The reader has effectively spent two pages trying to discern Mrs. Baroda's intentions only to realize that the story is unclear and will likely remain that way until the end.

Indeed, Mrs. Baroda continues to go back and forth, leaving the reader to question the validity of the initial assumption about Mrs. Baroda and her feelings for Mr. Gouvernail. Even when Mrs. Baroda resolves to leave the plantation (supposedly because she can't stand to be around Mr. Gouvernail), the reader is presented with a situation that challenges the very reason Mrs. Baroda wants to leave. The night before Mrs. Baroda leaves the plantation to stay with her aunt, Mr. Gouvernail discovers her on a bench outside under a live oak tree. Mr. Gouvernail makes a general comment about the weather, and then quotes a part of a poem by Walt Whitman (257). This is the first clue that the reader actually gets of Mr. Gouvernail's character because he quotes a poem to express his feelings. A knowledgeable reader, one who is familiar with the rules of the language and is considered "well-read," would realize that Mr. Gouvernail quotes a sensuous poem, and that his quote ends just before the words, "mad naked summer night," which would have finished the line if he had chosen to do so (397). Interestingly enough, the lines of the poem that Mr. Gouvernail quotes allude to a later part of the poem that discuss an "unspeakable passionate love," which would change the reader's perspective entirely if the reader is familiar with Walt Whitman's poetry (397). If the reader is not well-read, then the confusion has likely increased as to why Mr. Gouvernail would bother to quote part of a poem.

Directly after Mr. Gouvernail quotes Walt Whitman, the reader's uncertainty is eased with some reassurance of love (or infatuation, at the very least); this particular scene resolves the questions and uncertainty that the reader may have had about Mrs. Baroda's "wishy-washiness" over her feelings for Mr. Gouvernail. The bench scene resolves the questions and uncertainty for the reader because Mrs. Baroda seems to be so overcome with passion that she wants to "touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips," which does not sound very ladylike (257). Indeed, she thinks to herself that she might have given into her thoughts "if she had not been a respectable woman" (257). Here the reader may draw the connection between the title of the story and its significance to Mrs. Baroda; she is "A Respectable Woman" and therefore should not give into her unladylike thoughts.

In the beginning of the story, the reader began to distrust Mrs. Baroda as a character because she seemed to have no rhyme or reason to why she liked Mr. Gouvernail and so fiercely disliked him at the same time. Now, towards the end of the story, the reader's impression of Mrs. Baroda is now partially mended because it has been revealed that Mrs. Baroda has been trying to avoid giving into her thoughts about Mr. Gouvernail.

The end of the story wraps up the reader's amended impression of Mrs. Baroda. Her husband thinks that she dislikes Mr. Gouvernail, and this is accepted by the reader to be untrue. The reader would likely assume that Mrs. Baroda did not tell her husband about her true feelings because she thinks that she is not only respectable but "sensible" and that she felt that there were "some battles in life which a human being must fight alone" (258). However, here the readership takes two very different paths as to the ending of the story and how it should be interpreted.

The ending of "A Respectable Woman" complicates the story as well as the readership. Mrs. Baroda has her husband so convinced that she dislikes Mr. Gouvernail that Mr. Baroda "yields to his wife's strenuous opposition" and does not invite Mr. Gouvernail back to the plantation (258). However, Mrs. Baroda surprises the reader by telling her husband that it is okay for Mr. Gouvernail to visit them again. Mr. Baroda states that he is glad that his wife has overcome her opposition towards Mr. Gouvernail. The last sentence of the story is Mrs. Baroda's comment to her husband: "'Oh,' she told him laughingly, after pressing a long, tender kiss upon his lips, 'I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him'" (258). The reader has done nothing short of "mental aerobics" during the course of the story and the reader likely expects the story to end with a neat and conclusive bow, and that expectation is not met. The ending is where the interpretive community—the structure and values of the society that the reader comes from—is complicated greatly (Tyson 185). Even though "A Respectable Woman" was written for 19th century readers of *Vogue*, there are two different types of readers that would come to two vastly different conclusions that play on their way of thinking.

Stanley Fish coined the term, "interpretative community" and used it in his later work to prove that there is no such thing as a "purely individual subjective response" (Tyson 185).

The “interpretative community” is now being defined to show that the language used in “A Respectable Woman” can elicit more than one predictable response from Chopin’s readership. Lois Tyson explains an interpretative community as “those who share the interpretive strategies we bring to texts” (185), which consequently implies that there are numerous interpretive communities that one may belong to. The “interpretive strategies” that we bring to a text are affected by “prevailing cultural attitudes” and other kinds of “institutionalized assumptions” that tell us what literature is and how to find meaning in it (Tyson 185). For example, a 19th century male reader would have certain cultural assumptions that he would bring to a text, particularly about gender roles, that would affect the way he would find meaning in a text. On the other side of the coin, a 21st century female reader would likely be more open to various interpretations since the “prevailing cultural attitudes” are becoming less exclusive as to what kinds of things are acceptable.

This is likely a good place to pause and take note that for most of the story the interpretive community that has made up the average reader has remained the same for most of the story. This is due to the fact that the confusion that begins the story elicits nearly the same response from most readers. However, as Pamela Knights points out, “All Chopin’s endings complicate her fiction” (xxv), which consequently complicates the interpretive community. The ending divides the 19th century readership into two main interpretative communities: the knowledgeable reader vs. the conventional reader. The difference between the two main interpretations stems from the fact that *Vogue* had various readers. For the purpose of this paper, the readers of *Vogue* will be classified into the two groups knowledgeable and conventional.

It would be easiest to argue that the most common interpretation of the ending is the more scandalous one. The reader that takes the more scandalous reading would be the more knowledgeable reader of *Vogue*, and even most 21st century readers who are familiar with Chopin’s work would also take the more scandalous reading. Since *Vogue* had “refreshingly little desire to protect its readers” it would be likely that the magazine had a more knowledgeable and progressive readership that were up to date on poetry and fiction (Knights xvi). A knowledgeable reader would interpret the ending as Mrs. Baroda’s first

commitment to cheating on her husband. This is not written in the text, but is merely a gap that the knowledgeable reader has filled in. The glaring gap that the knowledgeable reader fills in is what Mrs. Baroda means by saying that she has “overcome everything,” and that she intends to be “very nice” to Mr. Gouvernail when he returns (258). It would be very easy for a more progressive reader to see that statement as her having overcome her inhibitions about giving into her passion for Mr. Gouvernail. When she states that she plans to be “very nice” to Mr. Gouvernail, it could imply that she intends to have an intimate relationship with him.

In the late nineteenth century, people in general were becoming more open-minded. However, that does not mean that *everyone* was open-minded. Conservatives in particular are not very open to change and favor traditional values above all else. The magazine *Vogue* did not necessarily publish with conservatives in mind as their audience, but it is likely that conservatives read the magazine and interpreted the stories as conservative. Even present day conservatives may stumble upon the story “A Respectable Woman,” and find meaning in the text that relates to their way of living. In this particular story, the conservative reader would fill in the gaps in the story with his or her own traditional views and interpret the ending as Mrs. Baroda committing to her husband and the renunciation of her passion. Therefore, the conservative reader would interpret Mrs. Baroda allowing Mr. Gouvernail back into the home, as her having truly “overcome everything” (258). The long tender kiss that she presses on her husband’s lips would be read by the conservative reader as her physical act of recommitting herself to her husband.

Kate Chopin’s story, “A Respectable Woman” elicits one main response from her readership at the beginning. The confusion takes precedence for the reader, and makes it difficult for the average reader to find a clear meaning from the text itself. The interpretive community that the reader comes from is how he or she will create the meaning of the story as it is presented. In this particular story, there is no clear “ending” that allows the reader to feel at ease; the reader essentially has to create a meaning which inevitably stems from their own beliefs and values. Stanley Fish argues that a reader’s response is predictable, but in his later work he also acknowledges that the predictability of response is affected by the reader’s

interpretive community. This story illuminates that issue, since our interpretive strategies complicate how we resolve a work of fiction that does not have a tidy resolution. Kate Chopin's "A Respectable Woman" allows the reader to find and create meaning within themselves, depending on what kind of interpretive community the reader belongs to.

Works Cited

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